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ABSTRACT

Data from a series of surveys of voters in the Midwest, conducted during the 1976 presidential election campaign, were used to explore the effects of the campaign in relation to when people decided for whom to vote. A second purpose was to consider the adequacy of the traditional dichotomous model of voters: people who make up their minds early pay close attention to the media campaign, while people who make up their minds late pay little attention to the media campaign. The results indicated the following: exposure to the campaign is necessary for media effects; partisan precommitment is sufficient to prevent those effects; in the absence of precommitment, those exposed to the campaign will make their decisions on the basis of its content; and in the absence of precommitment, those who are not exposed to the campaign will vote on the basis of prior party identification. Finally, those who decided for whom to vote during the campaign made up 40% of the sample. (TJ)

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TIME OF DECISION AND MEDIA USE DURING THE FORD-CARTER CAMPAIGN

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Fall presidential election campaigns have for three decades been thought to have little impact on the vote, owing to a paradoxical relationship between media use and the time at which the voter makes his final decision. Since the pioneering work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and their colleagues (1944; 1954), the electorate has been pictured in terms of a dichotomous model: citizens fall into either of two possible categories, each of which is impervious to political mass communication for a quite different reason. On the one hand there is a large group of pre-committed voters. As Pool (1963) has described them, these are partisans who "are inclined to read about politics or to listen to political speeches" but who "already have strong views which are not going to be changed in the eight weeks of an election campaign." And then there are the rest of the voters, who make up their minds seemingly at the last minute. They are less opinionated and correlatively more persuasible than the early deciders, but they are also less interested and consequently pay little attention to political news. They are unaffected by the media not due to resistance, but simply because of lack of exposure (Berelson and Steiner, 1964).

Buchanan (1977) summarizes prior research as demonstrating "that relatively few people changed their opinions during a campaign and that those who did were more likely to have been influenced by primary group pressures than by the issue appeals of the candidates; . . . and that 'independent' or shifting voters were not issue-oriented in their outlook." Katz (1973) paints a similar picture: "typically about 80 per cent, or more, of the voters have made up their minds about the vote before the campaign begins, that is at least several months prior to the election... The changers -- those who shift from one party to another during the campaign -- have been found to be relatively uninterested in the election and its outcome . . . [and] are not much exposed to mass communications about politics" (emphasis his). This dichotomous comparison is clearly central to the ubiquitous generalization that political mass communication can be expected to have only "limited effects." And while the Limited Effects

model has come in for considerable skepticism and general criticism in recent years (e.g. Chaffee, 1975; Kraus and Davis, 1976), the Early-Late Deciders contrast has stood without serious challenge since the first voting studies of the 1940s.

A dichotomous model does not exhaust the logical possibilities in this analysis, however, unless one assumes a very strong correlation between interest in an election and partisan pre-commitment. While this might have been the case at the time the first major syntheses of research on political communication were written, there is good reason to suspect that it is less so today. For several decades, voter identification with political parties has been decreasing, as has the power of researchers to predict voting patterns from party affiliation (Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1976).

But there is little evidence that interest in politics, or attention to political mass communication, has been decreasing in this same period.¹ As Katz (1973) comments, "The combination of the low degree of [party] loyalty and yet some exposure to election communication has become a more probable combination in the era of television than ever before." It is possible that a third group of some size has evolved, one that consists of highly attentive but not highly partisan or pre-committed voters. Such an emergence would not simply complicate the accepted view by expanding a dichotomous model into a trichotomous one. It would call into serious question the "limited effects" concept that grows out of the dichotomized image of the electorate. The dominant theoretical scheme from prior literature can be broken down into the following causal propositions:

1. Partisan pre-commitment is sufficient to prevent effects.
2. Partisan pre-commitment is necessary to produce interest in the election.
3. Interest in the election is necessary to stimulate exposure to the campaign.
4. Exposure to the campaign is necessary for media effects.

The first of these statements is adequate to predict limited (at most) effects for those who identify strongly with a party and who consequently decide how they will vote before the campaign begins. (While statement #1 is an obvious oversimplification, we will not digress into its merits here.) The remaining three statements comprise a chain of requirements that in the dichotomous model have been used to predict limited

effects for the entire remainder of the voters--who are all presumed to lack interest because they lack partisanship (statement #2). But while statement #4 is true almost by definition, and statement #3 has some motivational logic to it even if it is likely to be watered down empirically by "accidental" exposure of the uninterested to at least some campaign communication, there is no clear theoretical reasoning behind statement #2. It can be reduced to a more reasonable, purely correlational, form, i.e. that those who are strongly partisan are more likely to be interested in the campaign. This correlation has been strong in the past. But if partisanship has declined in recent years while interest has not, these two variables are probably not strongly related in a causal sense, and the correlation between them might also have diminished. This would mean that there has emerged a sizable voting group that is indeed interested and therefore attentive to campaign coverage in the media, but is not so partisan and pre-committed as to be unaffected by that content. It might be the case that this third kind of voter is responsible for the recent rise in "issue" voting, which has been manifested empirically by the increased ability of researchers to predict the vote on the basis of the positions of candidates and voters on current policy issues (Nie et al., 1976).

Time of final decision is a useful indicator to employ in the search for voters who do not fit into either traditional category. Decision time has a long-standing position in the research literature on communication and voting, and it is a concrete behavior that can be tracked throughout the duration of a campaign. If voters are interviewed with sufficient frequency, a number of groups can be identified in terms of the point at which they shift from "undecided" or "leaning" to the "definitely decided" category. In this paper we will attempt to identify three such groups: (a) those who are precommitted, as evidenced by their having a firm voting intention at the beginning of the campaign, and never wavering from it in subsequent interviews; (b) those who decide during the campaign period; and (c) those who decide at the very end of the campaign, as indicated by their lack of a definite voting intention when interviewed just prior to Election Day--but who do vote.

Syntheses of the research literature on time of decision have contrasted the first group with the second and third groups lumped together, following the dichotomous model. The purpose of the present research is to inquire into the distinctiveness of the second group. If those who decide during the campaign were in all important respects simply intermediate between the pre-decided voters and the late deciders, then we should not make much of the fact that they exist: they would be implicitly taken into account even in the dichotomous model, by interpolation. If, on the other hand, they turn out to fit the mold of the less partisan but attentive and issue-oriented voter we have suggested above, then their use of media and the political impact of that content upon them deserve special attention.

Pool (1963) recognized the possibility that some voters who were not pre-committed at the start of a campaign might make up their minds before election eve. But he dismissed the import of such a case by accommodating it to the general parameters of the dichotomous model. Until a person has decided which way to vote, Pool asserts, he pays little attention to the media; interpersonal communication determines his opinions. Once a vote intention has developed (due to personal influence), interest in the campaign is heightened and attention to the media quickens--but by this time the voter has shifted to the "resistant" category, and so the subsequent media exposure has little impact upon him. This kind of reasoning can be tested by comparing the communication behaviors at various points in a campaign of voters who make their final decisions at different times.

Research Hypotheses

Because this paper is an empirical challenge to a set of theoretical propositions that have been accepted for some years, we will be dealing throughout with contrasting pairs of hypotheses: ours, and those of the limited effects model. The data analysis will be built around a trichotomization of the electorate, with the usual early and late deciders plus a third group that is intermediate in terms of time of final decision.

The limited effects model would lead us to expect early deciders to be highly partisan and attentive to the campaign, but unaffected by its content. The late

deciders would be non-partisan but unaffected because they are inattentive to the campaign; instead, they should show evidence of heavy interpersonal influence. Implicitly, the intermediate group would be expected to fall, on the average, somewhere between the early and late deciders in all respects.

Our expectations are rather different. Generally, we anticipate a number of curvilinear relationships. The group that especially interests us consists of those voters for whom a political campaign is intended: less partisan, not yet decided, but highly interested voters who will pay close attention to the campaign for information about the candidates and their positions on policy issues. First, we expect the Campaign Deciders to identify less strongly with a political party than either of the other two groups. Second, we expect the Campaign Deciders to manifest at least as much interest in media campaign coverage as the Early Deciders--and much more than the Late Deciders. Finally, we expect the Campaign Deciders to pay particularly close attention to the campaign via the media, especially to bipartisan presentations that deal with differences between the candidates on issues. This last hypothesis is not based on prior literature, but on a sort of subtractive logic: if the Campaign Deciders are highly interested but not partisan, they will need cues other than party affiliation to guide their votes. Policy issues suggest themselves as one generic possibility.

There is a second category of possible vote-guidance cues often distinguished in the empirical literature; this consists of personality attributes of the candidates, or "images." Non-empirical writers often assert that television campaigning has given rise to "image" voting (e.g. McLuhan, 1964). We assume that a voter's persistent identification with a party in the past has been more a product of enduring policy issues than of the personalities of particular, transient candidates. If this has been so, then issue-based, rather than image-based, voting should be more likely to replace partisan voting when party identification is eroded. Historically, this seems to have happened; during the past quarter-century the ability of researchers to predict the vote from images attributed to the candidates has remained about at the same level,

while the respective predictive powers of parties and issues have fallen and risen as if the one were functionally equivalent to the other (Nie et al., 1976). In our analyses, we will examine image-based voting as well as party- and issue-based voting.

Research Design and Measurement of Time of Decision

Three bodies of panel survey data are used in this paper to examine the relationship between time of final decision and voters' partisan pre-commitments, issue-interest, and attention to the campaign via the news media. All three surveys were conducted during the 1976 presidential election campaign, and were originally designed as studies of the Ford-Carter debates of that fall. None of the samples is large, and so statistical significance will be lacking in some comparisons. Confidence in our findings must be based more upon replication from one data set to another. In any event, this paper is intended as an exploratory investigation of an important research possibility that has been ignored for some three decades, not as an attempt to arrive at definitive conclusions. To the extent that our results are promising, we expect this to be the first examination of the issues we are raising, scarcely the final word.

The most representative data set comes from a four-wave statewide panel of Wisconsin residents ($N=164$).² They were interviewed before the first debate (T_1) and after it (T_2), then again after all the debates (T_3) and finally after the election (T_4). Of the 139 respondents who reported voting for President, 49.6% said they voted for Carter and 48.9% for Ford; these figures are quite close to the actual Wisconsin vote, of which Carter received 49.4% and Ford 47.8%. (While no state is "typical", these results are very close to the national "average" in that Carter got 50.6% and Ford 48.4% of the U.S. popular vote.)

The supplementary data sets are three-wave panels from two midwestern cities. One was sampled from registered voter lists in Madison, Wisconsin ($N=95$), and was weighted deliberately by the original investigators (McLeod et al., 1977) to over-represent young (age 27 and under) voters.³ Madison is a decidedly atypical city, housing both the state capital and the state's main university; it has a quite liberal recent voting record, and a tradition of intense politicization. The third

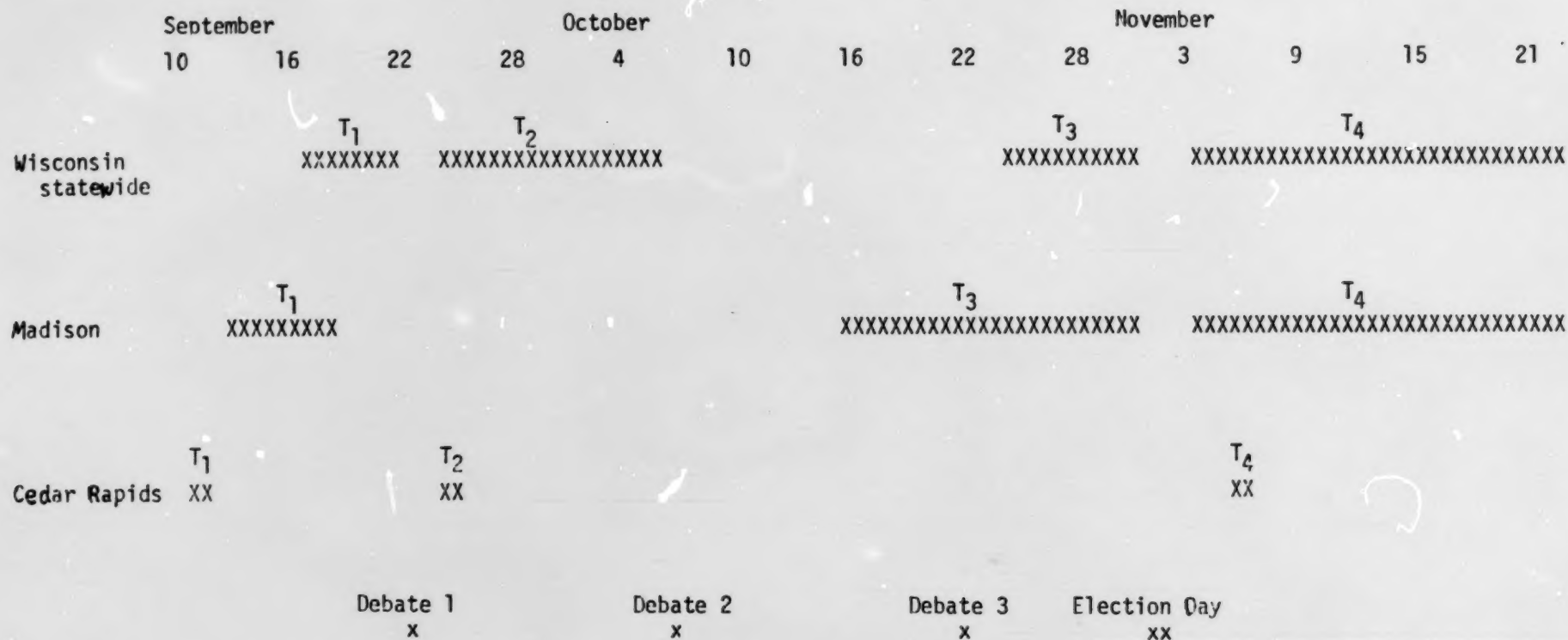


Figure 1. Timing of Interview Waves in the Three Panels

data set was provided by investigators at the University of Iowa; it is a stratified random sample of potential voters aged 18 and older in Cedar Rapids, Iowa ($N=149$).⁴ Like Madison its state's second-largest city, Cedar Rapids is slightly more likely to vote Democratic than is Iowa as a whole but it is not particularly noted as a center of political activity.

An outline of the interviewing timing designs for the three surveys is shown in Figure 1. All three have pre-debates (T_1) and post-election (T_4) waves. The Cedar Rapids design includes just one intervening wave, immediately after the first debate (T_2). The Wisconsin statewide design has a T_2 wave and also a post-debates, pre-election (T_3) interview. The Madison study has one intervening wave, which extends across the period of the final Ford-Carter debate; for approximate comparability with the other studies, we have labeled this T_3 also.

Due both to differences in the timing of interviews and to differences in the political character of the various populations being sampled, there are major differences in the time of decision distributions among these data sets. Our operational definition was the same in each case: working back in time from the person's T_4 vote, each voter was classified according to the earliest time at which he or she expressed a definite and lasting intention to vote that way.⁵ Those who voted but had not been certain of their intention in the last pre-election interview are "Late Deciders." Those who were certain of their intentions at T_1 , and who never expressed uncertainty in subsequent interviews, are "Early Deciders." The remainder, who reached their decisions by T_2 or T_3 , are grouped for our analysis as "Campaign Deciders." It is this latter group, whose existence is ignored in the literature based on a dichotomous model of time of decision, that is central to our study. Our assumption that it would be a sizable category is confirmed at least for the Wisconsin statewide sample, of which 40% were Campaign Deciders and the rest were about evenly divided between Early and Late Deciders. Only 18% in highly politicized Madison could be identified as Campaign Deciders; 40% of the Madison voters had already decided by T_1 . In Cedar Rapids, where the T_2 interview came quite soon after the T_1 wave, only 7% were classifiable as

Campaign Deciders. Two-thirds of those in Cedar Rapids were Late Deciders, although some of these would also doubtless have been classified as Campaign Deciders too, had there been a T_3 wave in that study design.

Because of the small numbers of Campaign Deciders in the two supplementary samples, we will use these data sets only in our first series of analyses, in which the main question is whether the Campaign Deciders appear to be distinctive in their combinations of political and media behaviors. To the extent that we find patterns that are corroborated across the three data sets, we will continue with more elaborate analyses of the Wisconsin statewide sample only.

An alternate method of measuring decision time would be to classify voters on the basis of their own later recollections of the times at which they made their final voting decisions. This question was asked in some form in all three surveys. (In the Wisconsin and Madison studies it would permit us to add to those samples several hundred additional voters who were not included in the full panel design but who were interviewed at T_4 .) We have rejected this method for several reasons. Post-election recall of decision-time has been used for some years as a surrogate measure in place of panel observations. This retrospective type of measurement is probably less often valid than are observations made at a series of time-points. We have much more confidence that voters can tell us whether they have made a decision at a given time than we have in their ability some weeks or months later to reconstruct the decision process and locate it accurately in time past. In Table 1 we compare these two types of measures empirically. It is clear that there is a good deal of non-random error. The Early Deciders are impressively accurate in their recall. But many of the respondents who later described themselves as Early Deciders had not indicated that they were yet certain of their voting intentions when interviewed during the campaign.⁶ If we were to use the post-election measure instead of the during-campaign measure, we would classify a few more people as Campaign Deciders, and many more as Early Deciders. While neither method is error-free, the measures we are using were taken much closer in time to the events that are of central interest in this paper. Other research has shown that retrospective questions are much more likely to introduce

Table 1. Retrospective Reports of Vote Decision Time,
by Time of Decision

<u>Retrospective vote decision time</u>	<u>Time of Decision</u>		
	<u>Early deciders</u>	<u>Campaign deciders</u>	<u>Late deciders</u>
Wisconsin (T ₄):			
Pre-nomination	25%	6%	8%
Post-nomination	63	40	8
After first debate	5	6	0
After last debate/October	5	42	30
Last few days before election	2	0	18
Election	0	6	37
	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>	<u>101%</u>
	(N=40)	(N=50)	(N=40)
Madison (T ₃):			
Before April primary	32%	8%	15%
Between primary and conventions	13	8	3
During/after conventions	55	31	21
In last four weeks before interview	0	54	33
Still undecided at T ₃	0	0	27
	<u>100%</u>	<u>101%</u>	<u>99%</u>
	(N=31)	(N=13)	(N=33)
Cedar Rapids (T ₄):			
Before first debate	100%	82%	36%
During/after 1st debate	0	9	8
During/after 2nd debate	0	9	2
During/after VP debate	0	0	10
During/after last debate	0	0	25
Election Day	0	0	18
	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>	<u>99%</u>
	(N=39)	N=11)	N=99)
Composite retrospective classification:			
Early decider	95%	49%	32%
Campaign decider	4	46	25
Late decider	1	6	43
	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>
	(N=109)	N=71)	(N=172)

Note. The composite classification represents respondents pooled from the three samples, and classified as Early, Campaign or Late Deciders according to their own retrospective reports and using the same time-cuts as were used to divide the sample into the three time-of-decision groups represented in the columns of this table.

error than are data gathered at the time of the event. For example, the very concrete question of whether a person voted in prior elections has been checked against public voting records in Madison; panel data gathered at the time of each election are much more accurate than later, retrospective data.⁷ Also, quite different categories were used to classify responses to these retrospective questions, and the time of measurement differs (see Table 1), so it would be difficult to compare data from one study to another.

The measures we are using are admittedly not optimal for our purposes. As in any secondary analysis of data collected with other research questions in mind, we must work with the best evidence we can find, on the assumption that encouraging results will lead eventually to research designed more specifically to explore the implications of this study.

Results: Differences among Groups

Table 2 presents our most basic series of comparisons among the three Time of Decision groups. To facilitate comparisons of somewhat different measures across the three samples, all means have been converted to standard scores. The first group of measures consists of conventional questions about party identification; we have folded over the Democrat-Republican scale so that strong Democrats and strong Republicans are grouped together, as are weak/leaning identifiers of each party, and independents. In each of the three samples, the Early Deciders are the most strongly partisan. The Campaign Deciders and Late Deciders are both low in the Wisconsin and Madison samples. The Campaign Deciders appear relatively partisan in the Cedar Rapids sample, but since the latter estimate is based on only 11 cases, we might consider it anomalous and conclude that we have found approximately what we had expected: that the Campaign Deciders lack strong partisan pre-commitments. This conclusion is also encouraged by other data from the Wisconsin sample in Table 1; the Campaign Deciders are the lowest group in strength of ideology (a folded liberal-conservative scale), and also rather low in reported political campaigning activity at the end of the 1976

Table 2. Selected Political and Communication Behaviors (standard scores), by Time of Decision

Variable	Sample	Time	Early deciders	Campaign deciders	Late deciders	p
Strength of party I.D.	Wisconsin	T ₁	+15	-09	-04	n.s.
Strength of party I.D.	Madison	T ₁	+41	-16	-31	.01
Strength of party I.D.	Ced. Rpds.	T ₁	+54	+31	-24	.001
Strength of ideology	Wisconsin	T ₁	+14	-17	+09	n.s.
Political activity	Wisconsin	T ₁	+21	-06	-11	n.s.
Political activity (1976)	Madison	T ₃	-04	+05	+01	n.s.
Political activity (prior)	Ced. Rpds.	T ₁	+26	+33	-14	.05
Debate exposure	Wisconsin	T ₂ ,T ₃	-13	+18	-11	n.s.
Debate exposure	Madison	T ₃ ,T ₄	+11	+07	-14	n.s.
Debate exposure	Ced. Rpds.	T ₂ ,T ₄	+02	+23	-03	n.s.
Attention to debates	Madison	T ₃ ,T ₄	+07	+48	-26	.06
TV campaign attention	Wisconsin	T ₄	+04	+19	-30	.06
TV public affairs viewing	Madison	T ₃	-07	+48	-14	n.s.
TV news viewing	Ced. Rpds.	T ₁	+03	+43	-06	n.s.
Campaign: newspaper/magazine	Wisconsin	T ₁ -T ₃	+16	+12	-31	.06
Public affairs: newspaper	Madison	T ₃	+19	+16	-25	n.s.
Public affairs: magazine	Madison	T ₃	-07	+08	+03	n.s.
Public affairs: magazine	Ced. Rpds.	T ₁	+27	+54	-17	.01
Discuss election	Wisconsin	T ₁ -T ₃	+31	+03	-34	.02
Discuss debates	Wisconsin	T ₂ ,T ₃	+09	+07	-19	n.s.
Discuss debates	Madison	T ₃	+10	+31	-22	n.s.
Talk politics	Ced. Rpds.	T ₁	+36	+39	-18	.01
Political knowledge	Wisconsin	T ₁ ,T ₄	+14	+08	-24	n.s.
Political knowledge	Madison	T ₃	+13	+05	-14	n.s.
Importance of issues	Madison	T ₃	-46	+35	+28	.03
Debates: helpful re issues	Wisconsin	T ₂ ,T ₃	-16	+20	-16	n.s.
Debates: watched to learn what candidates would do in office	Madison	T ₃	-13	+33	-02	n.s.
Debates: helped decide vote	Wisconsin	T ₂ ,T ₃	-14	+19	-38	.01
Debates: helped decide vote	Madison	T ₃	-36	+42	+16	.02
Debates: own candidate's strong points	Madison	T ₃	+12	+49	-32	.03
(N)	Wisconsin		(41)	(56)	(42)	
(N)	Madison		(31)	(14)	(33)	
(N)	Cedar Rapids		(37)	(11)	(100)	

Note. Entries are standard scores, based on the deviation of each group's mean from the total sample's mean, divided by the standard deviation; decimals are omitted for simplicity. Significance levels are based on F-tests (df=2). Interpretation of these p-values should be cautious for the Madison and Cedar Rapids samples, in instances where a highly deviant standard score is based on a small number of cases; they are shown as added information, not as a direct guide to statistical inference.

campaign. An interesting distinction is that the Cedar Rapids Campaign Deciders appear to have been rather active politically in campaigns as reported prior to the fall of 1976.

For the most part, the data on partisanship, ideology, and current campaign activity would lead a devotee of the dichotomous time-of-decision model to treat the Campaign Deciders as substantially like the traditional Late Deciders. When we look in Table 2 at our many indicators of attention to the campaign, however, a radically different conclusion is suggested.

Viewing of the Ford-Carter debates, and exposure to campaign or public affairs news via television and print sources, tend to be consistently high among the Campaign Deciders. Only for print media are the Early Deciders also high. There are some remarkable similarities in the standard scores from one sample to another, considering that there were many differences in the wording and coding of the questions asked. The Campaign Deciders are considerably higher than the other two groups on three of four indicators of debate viewing, and on all three estimates of television campaign/news exposure. The Late Deciders are almost always below the mean on the various mass communication measures, being the lowest of the three groups in 9 of the 11 comparisons in Table 2. The main point is clear: the Campaign Deciders constitute a distinctive group that is heavily exposed to the campaign but is not insulated from media influence by strong partisan pre-commitments.

Another portion of the traditional view is controverted by the data in Table 2 regarding interpersonal discussion of the election. The Late Deciders, who as we noted earlier have been assumed to be subject to interpersonal influence, are consistently across various indicators the lowest of the three groups in political discussion; if anything, their relative levels of interpersonal communication are even lower than their campaign media exposure. The Early Deciders are high in general discussion of the election, if not of the debates. The Campaign Deciders are about equally likely to discuss politics as are the Early Deciders. In general, discussion is associated with media use rather than being a functional alternative to it.⁸

A striking example of replication of findings between samples is shown in Table 2 for the measures of political knowledge. The standard scores for each group are quite similar from one sample to the other. There are only slight differences between the Early and Campaign Deciders, which lends further credence to our inference that the latter group is not substantially less oriented than the former, toward the political scene in general.

It is difficult to select items that would unarguably indicate a strongly issue-oriented voter. At the bottom of Table 2 we report standard scores for the measures that seemed to us to have most clearly to do with issue voting, given that this concept is not very precisely defined in the literature to date. On each of the indicators in Table 2, the Campaign Deciders stand out as the most issue-oriented group. They are more likely to say issues were important to them, and that the debates were helpful in learning about issues or to get an idea of what the candidates would do if elected. It is clear from a variety of evidence in other studies that the Ford-Carter debates were heavily issue-oriented media events, and that those who watched them did so largely to learn where the candidates stood on policy questions (Sears and Chaffee, in press). It is noteworthy that the Campaign Deciders were also much more likely than other voters to say that these debates helped them decide which way to vote.

Finally, lest we overdraw the image of an exceedingly "rational" voter, Table 2 shows that the Campaign Deciders were also the ones most likely to watch the debates in a search for the strong points of the candidate they already preferred, i.e. for reinforcement of shaky vote intentions. The Campaign Deciders did not go into the campaign with no idea who they would vote for; in most cases they were leaning toward a candidate already at T_1 . What they did do was to withhold their final commitments until they had a chance to compare Ford and Carter in direct confrontations, and to listen to what each had to say. From the perspective of the question of potential media influence, the Campaign Deciders do fit rather well the conditions that would be necessary for a fall campaign to have an impact: weak partisan pre-commitments, high attention to campaign information, and an openness to comparative information

about the candidates and their issue positions. The most common result was that tentative voting plans became crystallized into firm decisions (see also Sears and Chaffee, in press). We will consider below whether the decision making processes of the Campaign Deciders differed in character from those of voters who decided earlier and later.

Results: Differences over Time

To this point we have established with three separate samples a *prima facie* case for analyzing time-of-decision according to a trichotomous model. From here on we will limit our analyses to the Wisconsin statewide sample, which is the only one that has reasonable numbers of cases in each of the three categories. We will examine two kinds of processes: changes over time in single indicators of communication and relationships across time between variables measured at different times.

We found in Table 2 a general tendency for the Campaign Deciders to have reported overall greater attention to mass media reports concerning the election campaign. They were also more attentive to the televised debates. Figures 2, 3 and 4 trace these group differences across time in the pre-election waves of the Wisconsin survey. Figure 2 shows little difference among the three groups at T_1 , but the Campaign Deciders display a notable jump thereafter, so that the groups differ significantly at T_2 and at T_3 . A similar set of trends is found in Figure 3 for campaign news reading, although the Early and Campaign Deciders are never far apart. Figure 4 shows that across the series of four debates the Campaign Deciders were consistently high, although they like the other groups were inclined to skip the vice-presidential debate between Mondale and Dole.

To test the significance of the patterns shown in Figures 2-4, we pooled the T_2 and T_3 measures of attention to campaign television, newspaper/magazines, and the debates, to construct a single dependent variable representing campaign media attention; each of the three sets of measures (TV, print, debates) was weighted equally in this summing procedure. We then ran a hierarchical regression analysis, in which the first independent variable entered was the early (T_1) level of campaign media attention (estimated from the T_1 television and newspaper/magazine questions, weighted equally).

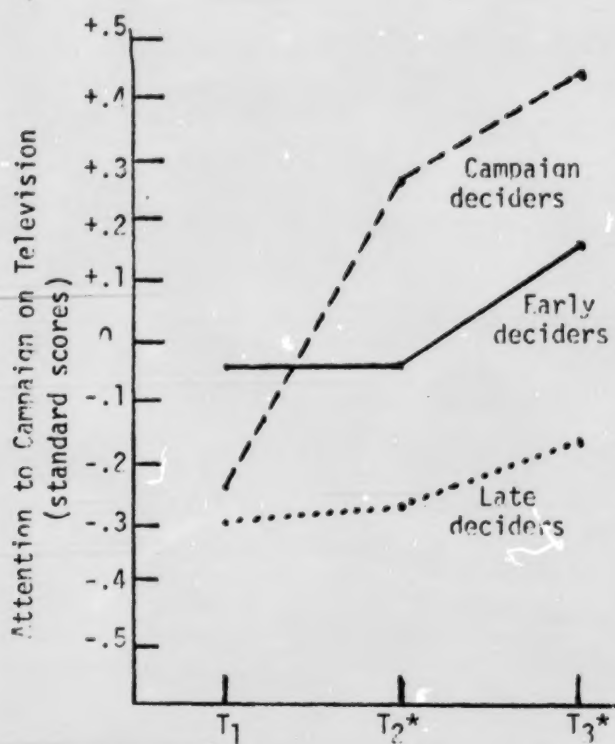


Figure 2. Attention to Campaign via TV During Campaign

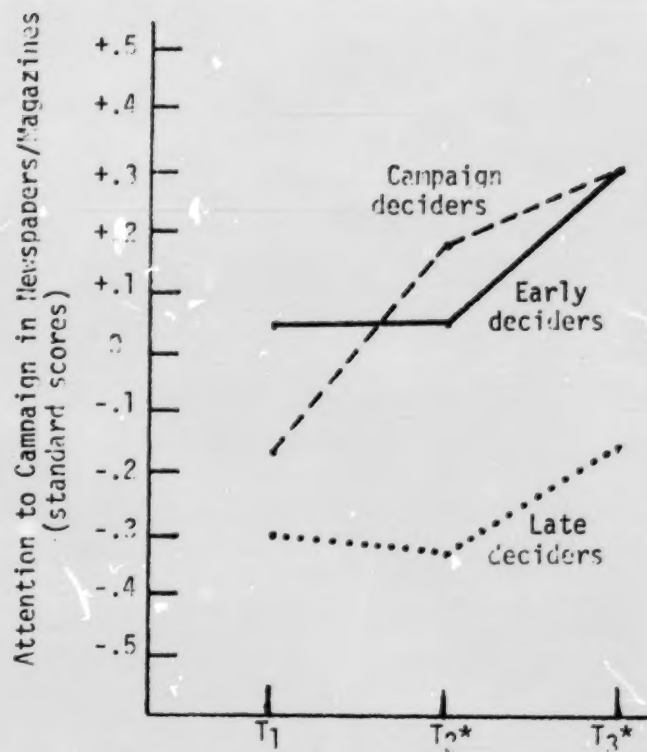


Figure 3. Attention to Campaign via Newspapers and Magazines

* Significant difference among groups ($p < .05$) at this time.

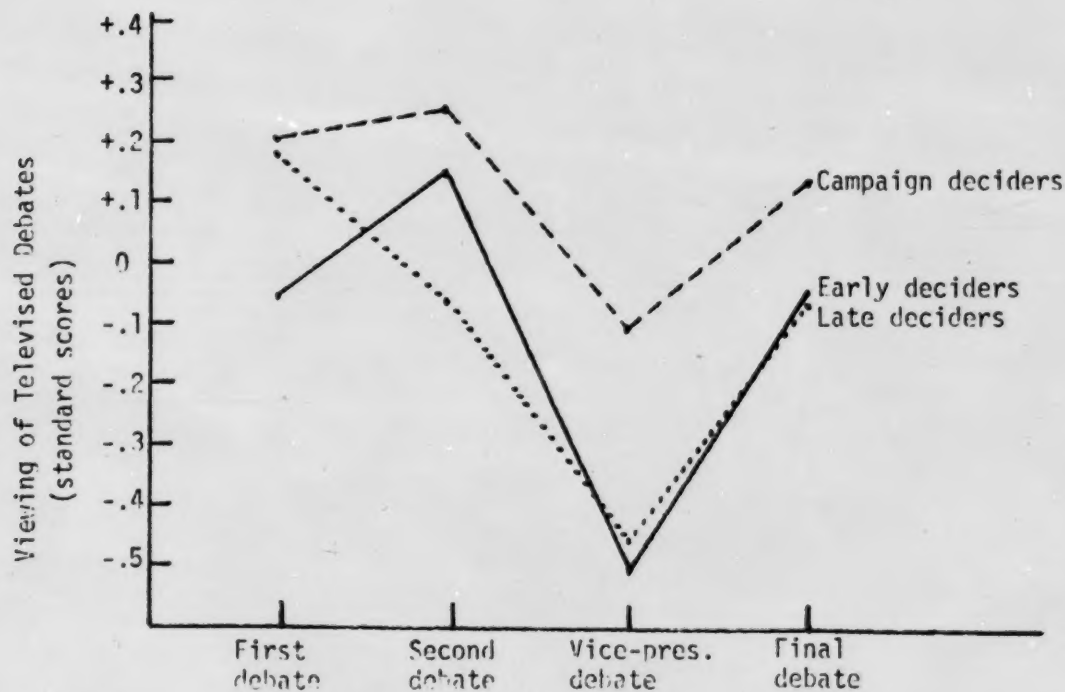


Figure 4. Viewing of Televised Debates, by Time of Decision

This T_1 index was of course a strong predictor of the analogous T_2+T_3 index, accounting for more than 41% of the variance. In the remaining blocks, dummy variables representing the time-of-decision groups, and the interaction of time-of-decision with T_1 campaign media attention, were entered. In each case, only the independent variable representing the Campaign Deciders differed significantly from the others ($p < .01$ for the main effect of Campaign Deciders, and $p < .05$ for the interaction between Campaign Deciders and T_1 campaign attention). Because of the significant interaction, we derived three separate regression equations from the overall analysis:

$$\text{Early Deciders: } T_2+T_3 \text{ Attention} = 13.6 + (2.5 \times T_1 \text{ Attention})$$

$$\text{Campaign Deciders: } T_2+T_3 \text{ Attention} = 21.2 + (1.5 \times T_1 \text{ Attention})$$

$$\text{Late Deciders: } T_2+T_3 \text{ Attention} = 10.3 + (2.9 \times T_1 \text{ Attention})$$

This set of equations illustrates that the significant differentiation of the Campaign Deciders from the other two groups consisted of (1) a higher level of attention to the media during the later phase of the campaign, and (2) a lower degree of predictability of that attention index from prior levels of attention.

A similar analysis of the antecedents of an index of campaign discussion was also performed. We combined, and weighted equally, measures of discussion of the campaign, including the debates; the Early Deciders were somewhat higher on the first measure and the Campaign Deciders higher on the second. But in the hierarchical regression analysis there was no significant main effect due to the time-of-decision dummy variables, and no significant interaction between the groups and the T_1 level of discussion. While null findings are not normally of much moment, in this case we should note again the stress laid in prior literature on the presumed importance of interpersonal discussion among the Late Deciders. The basis on which that group makes its voting decisions remains something of a mystery, except to say that they appear to have relatively little to go on beyond their rather weak party identifications (see Table 2).

We also used orthogonal polynomial multiple regression analyses to test the curvilinear relationships between time of decision and two dependent variables: media attention and interpersonal discussion.⁹ For this purpose, the Campaign Deciders were divided into two subgroups, those who had reached definite decisions by T_2 and

those who did not decide until T₃, thus making the time of decision variable into a four-point scale. For each of the two dependent variables, the linear function was non-significant. For media attention, the quadratic function, which roughly represents a curve that is low for T₁ and T₄ deciders and high for T₂ and T₃ deciders, was significant at the .05 level ($F=5.58$). This is in accord with our hypotheses. For campaign discussion, the quadratic function was non-significant; there was, however, a near significant cubic function ($F=3.35$) for campaign discussion. If replicated this finding would mean that those who decided by T₁ and also those who did not decide until T₃ ("Later Campaign Deciders") were higher than the other two groups in interpersonal discussion. This finding regarding the latter group is especially intriguing; it suggests that there may be a subset of voters who pay close attention to the entire campaign, and discuss it rather extensively, before deciding which way to vote. Unfortunately the small sample size in this case precludes our investigating this lead further here.

To this point the reader may find it odd that in an analysis of a major election campaign we have not dealt with the most central questions raised by elections: Who won, and why? As might be expected from earlier literature, the Republican vote was determined earlier: Ford won 59% of the Early Deciders and Carter 62% of the Late Deciders; among the Campaign Deciders, Ford had a slight 52-48 edge. More important to us here is the basis for these votes. Our earlier discussion focused on party identification as a long-standing predictor that appears to be on the wane, and policy issues and possibly candidate images as factors that might be replacing partisanship. Drawing again on the Wisconsin statewide data set, we used three policy issue measures that were associated with the vote: government efforts to alleviate unemployment, reform of the tax system, and defense expenditures. We also created an index from five "image" attributes: honesty and integrity, strength and decisiveness, capacity for effective leadership of the government, making clear his position on the issues, and ability to inspire confidence by the way he speaks. The T₃ perceptions of Carter and Ford on each of these items, plus the respondent's own preferred position on the three issues, were measured on 5-point scales. Ford-Carter image

differences were scored and summed across items; for the issues, Ford-self and Carter-self differences were calculated and the net absolute differences summed. Because of high multi-collinearity between the issue and image indices ($r=.61$), we ran separate regression analyses in which each was entered as a second independent variable after party identification. The results are shown in Table 3, in terms of the additional amounts of variance explained (R^2).

While most of the entries in Table 3 are significant, we should focus our attention mainly on the differences between pre-campaign party identification and in-campaign perceptions of the candidates as predictors, and the differences among the three time-of-decision groups. Because we have used hierarchical regression, it appears in Table 3 that party identification explains a greater amount of variance than do either issues or images; this is not necessarily the case. Table 3 is not intended as a test of the predictive powers of these different variables, but as a means of comparing their relative importance for the three time-of-decision groups.

There is in Table 3 a clear contrast between Campaign Deciders and the other two groups, in that party identification is a much more important predictor of the vote for the Late and Early Deciders than it is for the Campaign Deciders. The Early Deciders also display a significant tendency to vote in conformance with perceived candidate attributes, when party identification is controlled ($\beta=.58$). Among the Campaign Deciders, issues are more important than in the other groups, and the personal "image" qualities attributed to the candidates appear to make a particularly important contribution to the vote decision. The issue-image distinction seems to be more a researcher's convention than a critical theoretical difference; the two indices are highly intercorrelated. The personalities of the candidates are probably perceived and processed by most voters much like other "issue" discriminations.

Possibly the most illuminating finding in Table 3 is that the votes of the Late Deciders (who are not particularly partisan) are predicted exclusively by party identification in this analysis. Apparently their lack of attention to the campaign via

Table 3. Predictors of the Vote (R^2), by Time of Decision

	Total Sample	Early Deciders	Campaign Deciders	Late Deciders
Equation 1:				
T ₁ Party identification	.41*	.55*	.23*	.51*
T ₃ Issue distances	.15*	.19*	.30*	.00
(Total R^2)	(.56)	(.75)	(.53)	(.51)
Equation 2:				
T ₁ Party identification	.41*	.55*	.23*	.51*
T ₃ Candidate images	.22*	.24*	.47*	.02
(Total R^2)	(.63)	(.79)	(.69)	(.53)

Note. Entries are R^2 values representing the variance in voting explained by each of the listed predictors, in hierarchical regression analysis where party identification is entered as the first block, and then issue or image variables as the second block of independent variable. Significance tests are based on incremental R^2 ; all entries marked with an asterisk (*) are significant at the .001 level by F-test.

the media resulted in these voters having few additional increments of voting guidance that might be based on perceptions of the candidates as individuals or in terms of policy positions. While giving us little more information about the vote decisions of the Late Deciders, Table 3 does at least run contrary to the conventional characterization of Late Deciders as free of partisan predispositions. Although they decide seemingly at the last minute, they nevertheless finally do follow pre-existing partisan cues; we have found no evidence that they are peculiarly susceptible to interpersonal influence, but we have found here many reasons to accept the traditional view that they are impervious to the campaign because they pay little attention to it. The important point to be stressed, then, is that they must be clearly distinguished from the Campaign Deciders.

Discussion

Our argument for a trichotomous model boils down to the extent to which the Early and Campaign Deciders differ, since they are both so different from the Late Deciders. We find some notable differences throughout our analyses, and they are almost all in the direction opposite to that implied by the dichotomous model. The Campaign Deciders, while much less partisan in their voting than the Early Deciders, are more attentive to the campaign via the media and vote more in accordance with their perceptions of the candidates. Our main theoretical point, then, has to do with our original questioning of the widely held belief that the fall campaign in a presidential election can have but little impact. If only the Early and Late Deciders were taken into account, this would be a reasonable conclusion. But in the light of our empirical description of the Campaign Deciders, it seems quite unwarranted.

What we have identified in this paper is the type of voter for whom the efforts of both the news media and political campaigners seem to be designed: attentive, not pre-committed, interested in the candidates and their positions on issues. In none of our samples was this type of voter in the majority, of course; one could still say that for most voters the media campaign makes little difference. But that would be quite misleading, because for many voters the information generated by the campaign and its coverage appears to be quite useful in arriving at -- or at least substantiating--

a judgment as to which is the better presidential candidate. In our most representative data set, Campaign Deciders constituted 40% of the sample, outnumbering each of the other groups.

It should also be borne in mind that we have been looking here at the most extreme situation in terms of limitations on possible mass communication effectiveness: the late stage of a presidential election. In elections involving lesser offices, or in the earlier phases of a presidential year, we should expect to find many more voters who are seeking guidance via the mass media -- and to some extent finding it.

Returning to our breakdown of the previously accepted theoretical scheme, it appears that some serious revisions are in order. Notably, the correlation between partisan pre-commitment and campaign media exposure, on which the limited-effects model is based, does not exist in the Campaign Deciders. The following statements would be a better summary of the evidence we have reviewed in this paper:

1. Exposure to the campaign is necessary for media effects.
2. Partisan pre-commitment is sufficient to prevent effects.
3. In the absence of pre-commitment, those exposed will make their decisions on the basis of the campaign content.
4. In the absence of pre-commitment, those who are not exposed to the campaign will vote on the basis of prior party identification.

The first two statements are identical to those in our earlier paraphrasing of the traditional model. Statement #1 is practically a truism. Statement #2 applies mainly to the Early Deciders; they are both pre-committed and highly partisan, and they do not show strong evidence of campaign impact even though they are exposed to it to some extent. Statement #3 is generally characteristic of the Campaign Deciders, who are at most tentatively pre-committed and not especially partisan, and who are exposed most heavily to the campaign and vote on the basis of issue and image perceptions that are specific to it. Statement #4 describes the Late Deciders to the extent that we have been able to account for their behavior. Although these voters lack a strong party identification, in the absence of exposure to the campaign they end up voting

in the direction of their latent partisan leanings anyway; they give no evidence of candidate- or issue-specific vote decisions.

Time of decision has served us here as an operational locator for these different kinds of voters, but the functional statements we have set forth can be made without direct reference to time of decision. The close empirical correspondence between the functional statements and time of decision is due to the fact that the campaign stretches over a period of some weeks. To make one's voting decision on the basis of the campaign content, as Statement #3 specifies, implies deferring a final commitment until most of that information has been reviewed; in the 1976 fall campaign, the heavy reliance on the debates as a source of information was probably a factor that facilitated our empirical analysis. We would expect our findings to replicate in other close, information-laden campaigns such as that of 1960, but perhaps not in a lopsided and undebated election. For example, in 1972 most voters probably decided for Nixon over McGovern before the fall campaign got underway; Nixon of course declined to enter into any effort to provide debate-like information. In such a situation, Statement #3 would be no less valid but it would simply not apply to many voters; there were few who lacked a pre-commitment, and they got little campaign information on which to base their votes.

A theory about the potential for campaign media effects should explain the conditions under which we should expect them. It should not be tied to a particular moment in history. The dichotomous model would probably have accounted for most voters in 1972, and perhaps in similar past landslide elections such (e.g. 1964). We may have been fortunate in 1976 to be dealing with an election in which many voters were unsure of their choices and a considerable amount of information was provided via the campaign and the debates. In 1960 those conditions also held; Pool (1963) concluded that the debates were "the decisive event of the 1960 campaign," but treated this instance as if it were an exception to the general rule of limited effects. It now appears that when the same conditions recur in the future, we should again expect important media impact on voting.

For expository purposes, we have treated the governing conditions as simply present or absent. But in theory they are variables. The number of voters who are pre-committed prior to a campaign, and the degree of the indecision of those who are not pre-committed, can vary over a considerable range. So can the amount of information provided by a campaign, and the extent to which voters are exposed to it. Expressed in terms of continuous variables, then, the hypothetical impact of a media election campaign is:

1. Limited by the percentage of voters who are pre-committed; and
2. A positive function of:
 - a. The extent to which the remaining voters are unsure of their preferences.
 - b. The extent to which the campaign provides information on which voters can base voting decisions.
 - c. The extent to which voters who are not pre-committed are exposed to the campaign.

This formulation implies that the potential impact of campaigns varies widely. Categorical statements to the effect that we should always anticipate either major campaign impact, or only "limited effects", are unwarranted.

Notes

1. There seems to have been a slight tendency toward lower voter turnout, in the aggregate, in recent years. The apparent decline in party-identification has, however, been much more striking statistically.
2. Principal investigator was Prof. Jack Dennis of the Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin - Madison. Data were collected by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory. Like the other two data sources used in this paper, a report of the original study will appear in the forthcoming collection of debates studies edited by Kraus (in press).
3. Principal investigator was Prof. Jack M. McLeod of the Mass Communications Research Center, University of Wisconsin - Madison. Data were collected as a class project. See McLeod et al. (in press).
4. Data for this study were collected by student interviewers from the University of Iowa. See Becker et al. (in press). We thank Prof. Becker, and also Prof. David O. Sears of the University of California at Los Angeles, for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
5. Voters were classified as not yet finally decided even if they had a preference but declined in response to a probe to say they were "certain" of their intentions, or "definitely" would vote that way. We found many cases who considered themselves definite/certain at T_1 but who were less sure in a later interview; these are classified by the final expression of definite/certain vote intention, not the first.
6. We have applied a stringent criterion in determining whether at a given time the person had reported a "final decision" (see fn. 5). It is possible that some respondents, when asked to recall their own time of decision, thought in terms of the first time they had "leaned" toward their eventual choice, not to the time when they became certain.
7. Jack M. McLeod, personal communication concerning unpublished data.
8. In addition to following rather similar patterns across groups in Table 2, the measures of campaign discussion and media use were positively correlated in each sample.
9. The use of power polynomials to detect nonlinearity of regression is discussed in the Chapter 6 of Cohen and Cohen (1975).

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